Interview with Beacham McDougald
June 26, 2017
Interviewed at the Laurinburg Chamber of Commerce in Laurinburg, North Carolina, by Sarah Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Sarah Bryan: So you were talking about Ma'com.[1]

Beacham McDougald: Okay. Leaving the railroad, in 1881 he went back to doing what he was doing before, which was running a retail establishment, which was specializing in general hardware and undertaking. And he used his cabinetmaking skills to build some of the things that he actually sold, including the coffins, for undertaking. And at that time, undertakers generally supplied a wagon, and a coffin, and they would dress the person. And funerals, if you can imagine in the 1880s with no embalming, particularly in the summertime, it was kind of like, "We got to get Mama in the ground tomorrow morning." The customs at that time in this part of rural North Carolina was the body never left the house until it was taken to the cemetery. The person died at home, the undertaker's job was to wash the body, to dress it, to place it in a coffin. The funeral was always held at the home. It was then placed in the hearse, and everybody walked or rode behind the hearse to the graveyard, which at that time was somewhere close to wherever the family lived. If you lived in the community of Laurinburg where there was a cluster of houses, we had a city cemetery. If you lived in the country, you went to your church cemetery or your family cemetery. And Scotland County has got over 200 cemeteries that have been identified so far. A lot of them are family cemeteries out in the woods that nobody knew about. But the custom in those days without embalming was you could delay things during the winter, because of the natural cold air, but summertime it was urgent. And it was very simple. You know, hand fans were what people kept cool with. Electricity was a novelty, if it even existed. And it did exist in the people that had more affluency. And then as it moved into the 20th century, you know, Laurinburg started growing up and so forth, and building, and near the end of the 19th century, his building burned. There was a fire that destroyed all of downtown Laurinburg. And at that time, before they rebuilt the community, they came up with what they called the fire zone. Any building put in downtown Laurinburg had to have brick walls. So during that time, they moved to temporary quarters north of the railroad tracks, and he built the three-story building, in 1903, which still stands right beside the railroad track on North Main Street. And the first two floors were the furniture and hardware, and the third floor was where he kept caskets. And at that time, the caskets were being shipped in on the rail, they would pick them up, bring them to the funeral home, and there at the funeral home they would put the padding and the liners in the casket. And the livery stable was where— You know, you go back, and today you realize, well, the funeral home had a hearse, didn't they? No.

---

[1] M. A. McDougald (1827-1909), Beacham McDougald's great-grandfather, whose first name, Malcolm, was pronounced "Ma'com" (like "Macon").

The funeral home rented a hearse from the livery stable, along with the horses, every time there was a funeral. I look back at some old bills, charges and things, that they had on itemized funeral statements back then, and there was always a charge for livery. And I found some old invoices, and the names of the livery stables that they rented the hearses and the horses from. And it was tradition in those days, if the person that died was a child, the hearse was white; if the person that died was an adult, the hearse was black. I guess it was a way of just saying the purity and innocence of a child versus the adult. But we have to remember that during those days, a lot of children died of childhood diseases. My great-grandfather, upon completion of that building, and moving into it the first of 1904, he had his three sons joining him; and that was Will, Dan, and John, who was my grandfather and the youngest. John was born in 1870. And 1909, my grandfather Ma'com died, and at that time the three brothers made the decision, "John, you're going off to embalming school and we're going to learn to offer embalming." So John went off to Cincinnati for what was then a six-week course. That was in 1910. And he returned, and he was the first embalmer in about a 25- or 30-mile radius. So it was a situation in those days—you've got to think about it—all the roads were dirt roads. The major transportation factor was the railroad, and it came right beside their store. There were times when somebody would die perhaps in Lumberton, or die in Rockingham, and they needed to be embalmed; and they'd take them to the railroad station, put them in a car that was going to Laurinburg, to go to Laurinburg. My granddaddy would embalm him, send him back to Rockingham or Lumberton. (Laughs) So. You know, the thing about embalming in those early days is that it allowed families to come together. As I said, transportation was lower in those days, and if you lived 40 miles away, you know, getting there by road was difficult, getting there by railroad was possible, but you had to go with the train schedule.

And just looking at some of the old statements I saw where a person in Laurinburg died in 1916, I believe it was, in Lumberton, and my granddaddy contracted with a furniture store down there who picked up the man and put him in a coffin, and put him on the train, and sent him to Laurinburg, where he was embalmed, and they had the funeral here in Laurinburg, and they had all the livery charges itemized on it and getting the grave dug and so forth. And that funeral ended up costing, astronomically, over $200.

SB: 1916.

BM: 1916. That was probably a big fee. There's, I think, in those days, as I said, the funerals were always done in the house. The churches were, hadn't caught on in this area like that. It was always traditional to stay with the house.

SB: In town as well as out in the country?

BM: In town as well as out of town. And even when I got into the business, there was times where, after we picked up the person from wherever they passed and

did the preparation, we took them back home and even had funerals in the house. My grandfather died in 1955, and his funeral was at his house, because that's what his generation did. Most people still liked to bring the body home, because that was the custom. And I think— The funeral, to me, is a study in America's changing culture. Because it used to be that death was very close and personal, because it always happened in the home, because rural areas had hospitals but they were not hospitals that could do everything like we can today. They just kept the patient comfortable, could bandage wounds and things of that nature.

Thinking about that, it was such a very sociable thing, and even the early funerals I can remember from the '60s and '70s. I think about my mother's funeral; I was away in college when she passed, in the early '70s, and I came home from Atlanta and our house was full of people. Friends came and went. We did not have visitation at the funeral home, we had them at the house. The kitchen had more food in it than you could eat for two weeks. And it was just overwhelming community support, people turning out because that's what they did. Later, just a few years later, not even 20 years later, maybe 10 years later, most visitation moved from the house to the funeral home. We see very few people that even want the addresses listed now, because American society, "Oh, that vase I had, where did it get to?" or "Something valuable disappeared from the house." And it's sad to say, but that's today's world. We're more digitally connected, by so many different communication devices—Facebook, social media—that today you're seeing more people put on Facebook, "Mama died," and people send them condolences. And you think, "Oh, this is going to be a big funeral. That person has had 200-and-some condolences sent to them on Facebook." So you prepare as a funeral director for a large crowd. And 25 people show up. You know, the personal interaction has become more, "I expressed my condolences, I did my part." And I think that's a sad testament to Americans as a whole, is that we're getting away from the close personal interactions and becoming more digitally connected. And I think digital connections are good, but they should enhance the personal connections. I know you; if I see you somewhere, we're going to sit and talk. But if you lose someone and I'm close to you, I'm going to be there to offer my support, because nothing replaces the personal support. And that's becoming less and less, in today's society, compared to what it was 20, 30, 40 years ago. But we've gone from the home to the funeral home, to less formality. Even the Catholic Church. I don't know whether the unchanging nature I notice in the Catholics, where the parish priest is going to say, "This is the way we're going to do the service," but the family wants to add something personal to it, and he'll say, "No, we don't do that here," then the family will say, "Well, we're not going to have a mass here, we're going to just have something at the funeral home chapel or the graveside." And I have seen that done. As a matter of fact, the last three Catholic services that I did, the family did not go to the church or do anything at the church. They went to the graveside and had somebody else to do it. We're losing our connection to tradition at a faster pace than ever. I retired, am glad I did, because I appreciated the old way a little bit better. But I enjoyed the new way, because it did—technology, such

as displaying pictures of a person's life, writing obituaries that tell their stories, something that wasn't done 20, 30, 40 years ago. To me that could add to the tradition, but it's more or less replaced it. Back in 20, 30, 40 years ago, churches were literally full on Sunday. Today, you look around most churches, particularly if you live in an area like this which is just a hop, step, and a leap from the ocean, and a lot of church members have beach homes, you know where they are on the weekends? (Laughs) I mean, I'm not knocking them, but that's just today's society. We're more affluent and we do what we want to do on weekends. I just love to keep the old ways alive, because, in my studies, I go back and I look for the personal interactions more than the dates and the big historical parts. I like to look at the small, personal part. And that was what was so profound about the funerals of the middle of the 20th century on to almost the end of the 20th century. And when the internet came along, it seemed like, "Well, I can send them an email," but a personal note—just sitting down sending a personal note, versus an email, or a statement on Facebook. (Laughs) Sometime we get desensitized, and I wonder sometimes if people really mean it. But today, as I said, the business where I had, we were doing over, I would say, we were serving families that chose cremation over half the time. I can remember, I finished my—I started working in funeral service in 1972, and went three years before we had the first cremation. And then, "Where will we take it to have it cremated?" Had to take the person all the way to Durham, to Duke Medical Center, or then just called Duke Hospital. And then I was just talking with someone who's at the funeral home we used to own, and they said, "Last two days, other funeral homes brought us 11 cremations." So they're doing a lot for other funeral homes around here. And nothing against cremation, but the main thing is, still, people have lost somebody near and dear, and there's nothing—I still go back to saying—there's nothing that replaces your personal appearance, personally being there, a personal hug, touch, a personal note if you can't be there, a handwritten note. So. Okay. Let's stop with that. What other topic do you want to cover? (Laughs)

SB: No, this is great. How, in terms of how things have changed in the last 40, 45 years, what about differences between races' and ethnicities'—white, African American, Indian—funerals?

BM: I think African American funerals are still heavily attended. And there's a close bond there. They are gradually starting to do cremation, but they still revere the body, the physical body there, as the focal point of the funeral. I've been to several African American funerals this year, of people that I knew, and, you know, you never see it at a white funeral but every one of them, they got up and read every card that the family received from a friend, a condolence card. That tells you something.

SB: Read it during the service?

BM: They read what the card actually said. You can actually say, "Well, I've seen that card before," but then you read the little note under that—they wouldn't tell who it was

from—but they would read every one of those cards. You know, to me that is a personal touch. These people are reaching out. And the families, they will, may go to a funeral home and have an hour-long visitation or they may be at their house, or they see some people at the church or anything, but they're much more physically and emotionally connected with each other than you see in the white population. I went to a Native American, or Lumbee Indian, service on Saturday. And it was a totally different experience. And when I went to it—it was in Pembroke, which is—and the man was the funeral director.

SB: Was this Mr. Locklear?[2]

BM: Mm-hmm.

SB: I saw his obituary.

BM: Yeah, and I sat there, and when the family—when I got there there was no register book to sign, which, I'm sitting there thinking, "They won't know I'm here unless they see me." And then when the family walked into the church, my wife and I stood up, and we looked around, and nobody else was standing up, so we sat down. And then when the minister got up and said, "We're going to sing the first hymn," and said what it was, my wife and I and everybody else on my row stood up, and we were the only ones in the church standing up, so we sat down. (Laughs) Then when they did the second congregational hymn, the preacher looked at us, and said, "I'm going to ask everybody to stand this time." (Laughs) But a man—there were two speakers, and there was a friend of the man who gave a story about his life and what he was like and everything, which did not really get too personal, but just a little bit. And then the minister, he gave a sermon that could have been any Sunday morning sermon. He never mentioned the man's name. And I miss that part. I think— You know, in the African American and the white population, and even the Lumbee Indians that live here in Scotland County, they're more into making sure the person's name is prominently mentioned throughout the service. I was surprised that it was so different in Pembroke.

SB: Yeah, just one county over.

BM: But it was a beautiful service still. It was an experience, because I didn't know what to do. I felt like, first the register book's not here; second thing, you don't stand up when the family comes in, you don't stand up when the family's going out. It's just, there are differences, but I'm not one to say that they're right or wrong. I'm just saying I know what I'm used to. But I do appreciate the fact that the African American

---

[2] Samuel R. Locklear, Sr. (1928-2017), longtime owner of Locklear & Son Funeral Home in the Lumbee community of Pembroke, North Carolina.

population, they do turn out for their funerals. The whites will turn out more if it's a notable person—and I'm not just saying financially notable, I'm saying someone who made contact with a lot of friends, or someone who died tragically always brings out a lot of people. Still, I think about status funerals, or those where someone has, that lives in an area, has been in a retirement community and unable to get out, and all their family moves away, and then you have a funeral, you look around and might can count on ten fingers the number of friends that bothered to come. We're living longer, and dying slower. And as I said, the digital age— I think about last, a week ago Sunday, a young lady who was eight years younger than I am, I think—yeah—but I've known her and her daddy all my life, her sisters. She passed, and she was living in Indiana, and through the internet I contacted her two sisters that I knew and her stepmother, and expressed my condolences, because they all live in Upcountry South Carolina, Wilmington, and Rock Hill, South Carolina. And the one that died lived in Indiana. (Laughs) You know, we're spread out more, and I think that has a lot to do with the way things are being done today. And I know they asked me to send you, "Would you"—and I said, "I'm not in the family business," but the stepmother contacted me and asked me, said, "Is there room in the cemetery space in Laurinburg where her daddy is buried, that she could be buried there? She's being cremated." And I let her know, "There's plenty of room." And then she said, "Now, her mother's buried in McColl, South Carolina. Is there any room there?" I said, "There's plenty of room." So then they talked to the husband, and he said, "I'm not sure I want to release her yet," said, "I want to keep her in the house." So that's one thing that cremation allows, is a family to have time to make that final disposition at a time that's more convenient with the rest of the family. You know, it doesn't have to be done right then. But I'm sure, if that family here to come back here for a burial service and it was announced, that there would be dozens of people who would attend.

SB: One thing that I was talking to Mr. Bennett about, and I hadn't thought much about previously—I mean, your talking about the things that cremation enables made me think about this—I'm interested in things that people might put it the coffin with the body. Does that happen often?

BM: Yeah.

SB: And does it matter if they're going to be buried or cremated? Do they still put an object in there?

BM: Put a what on it?

SB: Some sort of object of significance to the person.

BM: Yeah, well, whether it's cremated or buried I don't think it really matters. I think about maybe a year and a half ago, an elderly couple in our church, and I knew them

really well, the wife passed, and her wish was to be cremated. And she was. And then maybe a little over a year later, her husband passed. And he didn't like cremation. He allowed it for her, but. And we had a committal service at the cemetery, where the graveside service was held, with his casket, and sitting beside it was her urn, and her urn at the cemetery, after everybody had left, the family opened it and placed her urn in his arms. And they were buried together. As I said, cremation offers some opportunity there, that I think a lot of families get a warm feeling of that. I had a friend of mine, he was at Scotia Village, I'll never forget—his name was Bernie [?]. Bernie was retired military, he was Jewish, extremely intelligent, and his wife was smarter than he was. She was a member of MENSA. And when she passed, Bernie had her cremated, and we had a Jewish rabbi do the service. And then when Bernie died, a Presbyterian minister who was his friend and also retired military did the service but did it entirely using the Jewish ritual. And we placed his wife's ashes in his casket, and took them to Arlington, where he was buried, they were buried at Arlington together. And it's what he had wanted, he would have wanted that. And that's what he wanted done, and that's what was done.

SB: Interesting that a Presbyterian minister did the Jewish service. Is that something that's happened here before, the cross-denominational—?

BM: It's happened more. As I said— As I was saying, the minister was Chaplain Tom Groome, who was a Presbyterian minister, who was born and raised in Groometown, North Carolina, outside of Greensboro, and he and Bernie were like that—I mean, they were good buddies. And Tom was one of these very intellectual but very compassionate Presbyterian ministers, and he sat down and he explained to me, "Here's what we're going to do, because this is a Jewish service." And I'm sitting there thinking, "Tom, you're a Presbyterian minister!" He says, "Yeah, but I'm doing what Bernie told me to do, and to get where I am today I had to know the Jewish customs as well." And you take that in one context, and then the facts of what I just showed, which is the last three Catholic services I've had, even though the people were Catholics in good standing they did not have a funeral mass or a priest, because the family did not want that. And they bring in—the last one had an Episcopal priest who was an in-law. I think is a—she was a daughter-in-law, and she was an Episcopal priest. And she did the service. And I realize how important that was, because it was a family member, and the family member knew her and loved her and you could tell that in the message. And the way the family planned that whole event around it, it was not anything that any funeral mass would have allowed, but the family obviously wanted it because it was comfortable to them. And that's the—you know, I think about probably ten year ago there was a thing I had on my general price list to have every family, just kind of a package plan, "Complete traditional funeral." When I retired last year, I couldn't tell you the meaning of a "complete traditional funeral," because, "Wait a minute, you mean we're going to do this and this? Let me go back and look over my notes and see how we do that." Because it's become such a change today that people are doing what

they have value in doing. You're not old enough to remember, but I remember back in my high school years you had limited choices in the clothes you wore, the food you ate, and where you were wanting to go; number one, because everybody didn't have a car, you had to pile in together; number two, the clothes was all dress-up clothes, and you did have a pair of jeans or something like that you could wear, but nothing like we have choice of today. Today, think about cars; it's not a Chrysler product, a Chevrolet product, a Ford product. Foreign makers are here. Or let's talk about motorcycles. Television stations; I grew up when you could watch one channel. Today, I don't know how many channels and satellite stations are out there. We just have a little satellite—not a satellite but an antenna on our chimney, and we pick up about five stations, but that's plenty. But we have the internet, and we can watch everything from Netflix to—I've got on the Smithsonian channel and I love the Smithsonian channel. On wifi. Our choices today are so many that, when you start saying "traditional funeral," I would say less than five percent of the people have a traditional funeral. And what the traditional funeral meant was the person is picked up from where they died and taken into funeral home care, where they are embalmed, washed and dressed, placed in a casket, and visitation is held at the funeral home. Chairs, register stand taken to the home, where friends visit, food taken, the family comes to the funeral home, spends two hours the night before the funeral greeting family and friends, because more people can get to see them today at night than they can during the day. So visitations were always at least twice as large as the funeral. And then the next day you'd take the body to the church, go pick the family up in the limousine, line up the rest of the family, come to the church, have a traditional funeral, and then everybody would follow in procession to the cemetery where you would have a committal service. I would say five percent of the time that happens today. (Laughs) A good friend of ours died about two weeks ago—matter of fact, last time I talked to her she was sitting at this table. She was with our tourism development authority. She had a stroke. But she told me, she said, she asked me about cremation, and we talked about her options, and when she passed, they did just what I thought. She liked the idea she would be cremated, we would have a memorial service for her in the church that she loved. Over 400 people were there. And then after the service the family went into the church fellowship hall, where they greeted people. And they're going to scatter her ashes out on their farm. But she had told me that was what she wanted, and that's what they're doing.

SB: I'm so sorry that you lost a friend.

BM: [Emotional] Yeah. And you know, rather than sitting in church looking at a casket, they had a large portrait of her on the easel. And it was just [?]. It was a beautiful service, and it had nothing to do with the casket. It had everything to do with who she was. And I think that's what people are looking at today. If—I think about, too, downtown Laurinburg is getting ready to be revitalized, and they're bringing a bunch of restaurants in. They're not just going to be restaurants where you go and order something, but restaurants that provide experiences. You know, if you go in and order

a sandwich, you don't just sit down at a bland table at a bland restaurant, you look at the pictures they have hanging on the wall, artwork, you look at the designs that they have professionally done, because they said, "I really felt good in that restaurant. The colors they used, the design, the pictures they used and everything, make dining an experience. And, oh, by the way, I did have a sandwich—but I can't remember what kind of sandwich I had!" And the same thing would be about a funeral, is you remember all the things that were going on around it, but if somebody were to say, "What kind of casket was he in?" "I don't even remember the casket. There may have been one, but I don't remember." So I think that's where—all of American society is going that way.

SB: With funerals being more sort of personalized and less predictably traditional, with the idea of what's traditional being less predictable, and it sounds like funerals being more individualized—

BM: It's very much more individualized.

SB: —how much of the funeral director's job now is carrying out individual plans, and how much is suggesting, "We could do it this way"?

BM: I think the funeral director has got to be what I would call a physician with great beside manners. You still have a job to do, and that is to get the dead where they need to be, and the family where they need to be. Now, the dead need to be disposed in some way, and you still accomplish that. But you've got to be there and explain to the family, and understand all the variables out there, and be able to share with the family—you know, let them talk and give you the clues. But then because you understand what is possible and what is not possible, you can say, "Let me just give you a couple of scenarios, see which one you like, and we can use that to maybe go in this direction." And even sometimes, if you'd like to have, regardless of whether they're being buried, cremated, whatever, if they don't want Mama's urn at the service—"Okay, are you going to keep Mama's cremated remains, or are you going to scatter them? After the service, what are your plans?" "Oh, we want to bury Mama out beside Daddy." "Okay. Would you want to do it before you have a service, after you have a service, or sometime later in the future?" and then they can say, "We want it before the service. We want it to be a private, intimate time for us." Okay. "What do you want it to look like at the cemetery when you are there? Do you want any special sounds, do you want any music?" People don't ever think about it, but music—to me, music tugs at the heartstrings more than anything, because the songs we hear that we've heard before takes us back to a memory. And I've had more people, when I mention music, they come up and they talk about something, "Gosh, Daddy loved Benny Goodman. Jazz. Old-time jazz, the clarinet." "Okay." I can pull up Benny Goodman on YouTube, and have it with the Bluetooth connected to some speakers there at the graveside. Or, being a Scottish population, we've got a bagpiper I can call on who can play whatever you

want, as far as the bagpipe tune. Last summer I went to a friend's graveside service, and they brought a small string orchestra down from Chapel Hill to play at the graveside. And it was just beautiful. But when you're at a graveside, when you start talking music with people, and I'm trying to describe the scenery, they're thinking, "There's nothing but tombstones around there." Well, the view's going to be the same day after day, but we're talking about this time there. The music's going to be— And then, "Is there anybody in the family that may want to share some personal thoughts?" And they start talking among themselves, "What kind of thing—" "Do you feel comfortable laughing? What kind of mood do you want to set?" And I look over here and the son says, "Oh, I got to tell you about Mama's story when she did this down at the beach" or something. It might be something truly funny, everybody breaks out laughing again hearing about it. "We need to share that with the grandchildren. They're going to all be there." They do. Now, you've got to remember, by sharing these kind of stories with the grandchildren, you're educating another generation that this is what is tradition today. It wasn't tradition ten years ago, it won't be traditional ten years from now. So the word tradition, as far as funeral service, changes so much. And then after that, that particular service, one of the family friends who, his grandmother and grandfather lived next door to me, he came up and started talking about his father, who used to be Dean at the UNC Law School and on the Federal Court of Appeals in Richmond, Virginia. And he said, "Daddy hasn't got much time." "Let's walk across here, we'll talk." So we walked over there. His daddy's going to be cremated, and he'll be buried. (?) He let me know where he was going to— "Now, we're wanting to [split?] Daddy's ashes in half, because his first wife and his children's mother was buried here. We want Daddy to be buried— And his current wife, who lived with him in Chapel Hill, they will be put together in Chapel Hill." And he said, "Is that unusual?" "No." "You sure?" "Yeah." "Is it illegal?" "You're a lawyer, you know it's not illegal." (Laughs) But you know, people want to discuss all of their options for things like that. I remember one friend I had, way out at the North Carolina Rural Heritage Center, getting ready to have a celebration or something, he said, "I wanted to let you know, when my time comes, I want you to divide my ashes up into 14 separate containers." I said, "Okay, Dan." I said, "Share with me what you have in mind." He said, "There are 14 special places I've been or lived, and I want some of them at every one of them, because they were all special to me." And he started giving me the story on every one. Ironically, he died two weeks later. And his family came in. They said, "Beacham, we've got a very unusual request for you." I said, "What?" "I know you've never heard anything like this, but we need Dan put into—" And I finished the sentence: "Fourteen different containers." (Laughs) They looked at me—okay. I said, "I'm sorry, but I can probably remember about five of the places, but—" (Laughs) And you know, the whole conversation to the family, they got to sit there and we talked, and they remembered or recalled the special memories at each one of those 14 different places. That's becoming today's ritual. There's nothing wrong with it. Now, they found comfort in it, I found comfort in it. Because I was the one to spread his ashes in one of those places, and that was where we were sitting when he told me what he wanted." But, you know, it's— We've had services where— I want

to show you a picture. I think I've got it on here, matter of fact I know I've got it on here. [Looking for photo on his phone.] Trying to find—a friend of mine who died, it'll be two years ago this summer, and he was kind of a—he loved photography, and he was a great photographer, particularly sports scenes. And at Scotland High School, which is our high school, he would always be along the sidelines with his camera, taking pictures of everybody. And last year he passed, and—two years ago he passed—and he said, "I want everybody to wear team attire." Now, this was in August. There we are [showing photo of five people gathered, wearing team shirts] at his house. Of course, that's me. I'm the official undertaker. That's his sister, his brother, his aunt, and his father.

SB: That's great. I love that there's three Laurinburg shirts, and then Duke and Carolina framing them.

BM: He was a Carolina fan. And we cremated him, and his wish was to be scattered on the football field at Pate Stadium[3], where we played football. Well, school was getting ready to get started, and I called the superintendent, and I asked permission. And he didn't like the idea. He said I might start a precedent. I said, "It's between me, you, his two brothers, and two best friends." He said, "Well, call the principal at the high school." I called the principal at the high school, explained to him, he said I needed to talk it over with the superintendent. I said, "The superintendent tossed it down to you." He said, "When do you want to do this?" I said, "You tell me the best time. We'll do it inconspicuously." He said, "We're having a big meeting for all the staff in the school auditorium at nine o'clock that morning. Can you do it at nine o'clock? I said, "Sure." So I went out and got a little plastic bucket, and I painted half of it Carolina blue, and the other half of it royal blue, which is Scotland High School blue. But it's also Duke blue. He hated Duke. (Laughs) So I told his brothers, I said, "[brothers' nicknames redacted]," those are his brothers' names, I said, "you see the two colors here?" They said, "Yeah. That's Scotland County and Carolina colors." I said, "No, it's Carolina colors and Duke colors." They said, "He'll come back and haint you!" Well, we started at one end of the field or the other, and everybody took a handful, and they walked away and they scattered them from wherever, and they'd come back and get another handful. Walked all the way from goal line to goal line. And that's where he's scattered. And the brothers, that's what they wanted to do. But as I said, I can't be as creative as a lot of people can. Everybody has their own values. And the brothers were most appreciative I was able to be the facilitator to make that happen. You know, it's kind of like cremation is—you can scatter ashes on public property, no problem. School is public property. But it is fenced in, therefore I felt I needed permission. You can scatter them on private property, with the owner's permission. You can scatter them at the beach between the high tide and low tide mark. But you still see people go and dump them off a pier, but it doesn't make any sense, that old rule said if you scatter somebody

[3] Football field at Scotland High School in Laurinburg.

in the ocean it's got to be three miles out. Nobody pays any attention to that. I mean, the last time I scattered at the beach, I took it to the inland waterway and went over to the oyster beds, because they told me they wanted to come back as mother of pearl. And what the cremated remains are made of are perfect for the oysters. Yeah, it's great nutrition for them. So they'll get to come back as mother of pearl. But would I have thought about scattering somebody in an oyster bed because they wanted to come back as mother of pearl? No. (Laughs) But it's just that— People have different values. I had one person, he wanted to be flown, wanted to have his ashes scattered off of Cape Hatteras from an airplane. And that was done. We facilitated that happening. It's just—you know, I still feel, in all of that, people still want someplace that bears a name, that that person lived. You know, years ago cemeteries were the gathering places on Sunday afternoons, because we didn't have TV, we didn't have radio, and people went to cemeteries on Sunday and cleaned off graves, and it was a social thing. We don't do that anymore today. People still want to have something somewhere with their name on it. And our son is not buried on our cemetery lot, but there is a marker there for him. And I think you see a lot of places where—and even if you go to the vet clinic in Raleigh, the vet school—you'll see bricks that have people's dogs' names on them, and the dates on it. You go to our local hospice place, they've got a patio, and they've got the names that they have engraved of people. The people may be not from here, but they've got, the family knows, "I can go, and that's my special place." It's kind of like the Vietnam War wall, with the names. I went, and I remember a classmate through the ninth grade, he was a couple years older than I am, and after ninth grade he quit school and went and joined the military, and was killed in Vietnam. And I remember, I was still in high school when we had his funeral; buried him. I went to Washington, DC, and the first thing I wanted to do was find his name on the wall, and just went up, touched the name. That's a way of remembering things today. It's just, we've got so many choices today that—as I said, what tradition? There's no traditions anymore. You know, being in business forecast, I read this—it may have been the *Kiplinger Washington Letter*. You know, years ago there were—every town was populated by mom-and-pop stores. They gave exceptional service, you know them, you bought from them. Then the big box stores came along and people started going to them because the prices were better. And you go to Walmart instead of these places, so the mom-and-pop stores closed. Now the internet is coming along—Amazon.com, they've even bought out Whole Foods—it's going to be where you go on Amazon and pick your stuff, and Whole Foods makes sure it gets delivered to your house. So big box stores are getting in trouble because of the internet. But it said, that creates another opening for mom-and-pop. You go back to small-concept, and you create experiences, and what was I telling you about the family store, the little sandwich shop? It's an experience. You don't just go in and get a sandwich. You go because it's an experience. Why do people—I can go to the store and buy a sixpack of beer for, what, four dollars? Why do I go to a brewpub and order a beer, and pay seven dollars and a half for one, when I can go and buy a sixpack for four? You're paying for the experience. So little things like that are bringing—it's kind of like the circle keeps changing and changing. And that's what I hope to see. The old

McDougald building, the one by the railroad track, they're tearing out the inside. They have a company that's interested in turning it into a brewpub. Have a place on the first floor, a balcony on the second floor looking down. And I've been in a place like that on Fayetteville Street in Raleigh. So. And you know, you get a good meal, but you go in those old buildings that have been torn out and rebuilt, and you're looking at the brick wall that's a hundred-and-something years old, or two hundred years old, and you keep looking around at all the things they've done on it. It's an experience being there. You don't think twice about paying seven dollars and a half for a beer. So. That reminds me of a place downtown, 215 on Main, last—it's been about two years ago—but there was a man who—this would be an interesting—very nontraditional. A man moved here who was originally from Chicago. He was a financial planner, and he and his wife moved here into the retirement community, Deercroft. And he passed of cancer. Her favorite picture of him was he was wearing a red Hawaiian shirt. But he loved playing in a folk band that played in Chicago, and people still got together. And when he got sick, the one thing he wanted to do before he died—using internet technology, with his friends, he wanted to do an Eagles song together. They did. "Seven Bridges Road"? I can't remember the full name of it. Anyway, they did. When they had the memorial service, you know, "What church?" "Lenny didn't go to church." "Okay. Okay." She said, "Can you find somebody to talk?" I said, "Let me talk to you a little bit to see what I can get out of you; I might be able to talk." So finally agreed that I would be the officiant. I showed up wearing a red Hawaiian shirt. Actually, I had on a dress shirt over it. I got up there and I said, "Now, we're going to tune in to Lenny." So I took off my bowtie and took off my white shirt and coat, and said, "Okay." Pulled my shirttail out. "Now we're here with Lenny." And I started sharing some stories that she shared of his life, and I had a portable mic, and I said, "Now I'm going to walk around—" and probably 12 people got up and shared their Lenny stories. And they played that song, from him and his friend together, played the music that he had played. And then when it was over with they all went to 215 on Main Street, which has got craft beer and wine and so forth, and she treated everybody to (?), because Lenny loved playing in coffeehouses like this.

It's not the typical Bible-thumping funeral anymore, but there's still going to be a lot of people that want the Bible-thumping funeral. And that's value. As long as it's valuable to them. And I've always thought, I said, "Look in the mirror, and everybody looks different. When it's time for them to go out, make the ceremony reflect them."

SB: Something you mentioned that had not occurred to me until you mentioned your friend who died in Vietnam is that the funeral home business in your family started with the Civil War, and then you entered the business, what, at the tail end of the Vietnam War?

BM: I was at the tail end. I finished college and I worked at the funeral home in the summers when I was in college. And then when I finished in '73 I was working fulltime.

And then it's from September of '74 to August '75, I was away at mortuary college in Atlanta. That was when my mother passed. And stayed in it from '72 to 2016. And if I could have done something different, I wish that possibly five years ago I had taken a several-month sabbatical.

SB: Why's that?

BM: The changes were happening so fast, that I really needed to step back from the business and look at it from afar. Go visit some other friends, like Danny Jefferson[4] that I mentioned, and have discussions with him about what's going on. Taking all these thoughts, and just set down and contemplated. You know, like I'm talking to you here. How are we going to be able to offer things, to be able to communicate effectively? The key thing is communicating. If you have somebody come in, and they are a devout conservative Christian that wants a traditional funeral, how can we raise our traditional funeral to a higher standard for them? And if you are a free spirit, low-religion, and your family, you're still loved by family, how are we going to offer them—? And if they were both in the funeral home on the same time, one of them on one side and one of them on the other side, how do you make sure you don't have any—you know! (Laughs) I remember, we've had several Buddhist services, and they're always cremation, and the circle of life, and things like that. And they like to burn incense. Well, at the same time you've got a family on the other side of the funeral home, and that incense gets in the air circulation system and comes up over there. There's a problem. How do you separate that, without being offensive to each other. There's a lot of things, and as I said, I wish I could have had a six-month sabbatical five years before I retired, and set back and looked at the changes, and come up with a clearer idea of— It's all about communication.

But I was ready to retire anyway. I would have still stopped when I did. I don't know, it's just— The tangent curve that keeps going up higher—you know, from trigonometry or geometry, you know, it curves up—that's the way you would almost see the changes going in funeral service now. It's just, a shorter time, it's still going up faster. 1997, put the crematorium in at the funeral home, we were doing 13 percent cremation; last year I was there, we did 56 percent of our services cremations. It's going to still go up. Like my grandfather, who died in 1955 at the age of 85, he had his funeral in the house because that's the way he is. But when the generation— My Baby Boomers' generation is the old generation now, and we're also the generation that were the hippies of the 1960s, we were the first generation to say, "We're going to do it our way." It's going to have a profound effect on funeral traditions.

SB: Does that generational divide exist among funeral directors and morticians too?

---

[4] Funeral director in Kernersville, North Carolina, and a friend of Beacham McDougald's.

BM: Oh yeah.

SB: The Baby Boomers and the people older?

BM: That's why I really knew that I needed to get out. If I had a professional person who was 20 years younger, who had skills, communication skills, and everything, where they would have been, I could have said, "You run with this." Because when I started, my father used to tell me stories that, when he graduated from mortuary college in 1935, he said, "I last embalmed a body in a house"—which was still—"in 1938." And then after that he started telling me about problems he had trying to make changes, because his daddy said, "Well, we don't do that. We would never do that." But my daddy proved my granddaddy wrong. In the mid-1970s, I was the one that came out, and I said, "I want to do that." "No. We don't do that. People won't buy that." Well, I started hearing people talk to me, and they'd say, "Well, I just want a wooden casket." "Okay." So I said, "I'm going to buy some wooden caskets." But Daddy said, "People won't buy those things!" Well, by the 1980s, over half of our sales, casket sales, were wooden caskets. Daddy said, "Well, okay! They do." And when I started noticing the cremation, I said, "You know, a funeral parlor up in Southern Pines put in a crematorium." "We're not going to do that!" Said, "That'll encourage more people to cremate!" "Hmm, not really" I said, "They were having to take them all the way to Durham to have them cremated. Now they're having them to—" "No. We're not doing it." My daddy died in 1995. We had the settling of the estate by 1997. A year and a half after he died we had a crematorium up and going. So our generation is different. And I see it today, raising my granddaughter, 12 years old. This is her life, right here. [Tapping on phone.] We had (?) out this weekend because I said, "Next week is going to be a little bit cooler and less humid. I'm taking you out and putting you on that Zero Radius lawnmower, and you're going to learn to mow that—" "I'm not going to mow the grass!" I said, "Listen here, young lady. I was pushing a lawnmower when I was eight years old. You're no better than I am. You're going to learn some of these things." And I'm worried about the new generation, because they're not able to— Lordy! I said, "Gosh, if I was 12 years old and had a lawnmower I could ride on, I'd thought I'd died and gone to heaven." But you know, a story I've told people, we're having a big class reunion this year in November. Scotland High School out here will be 50 years old this fall. We're having the first three classes—sophomore, junior, and senior classes—I was the junior class. I said, "We're going to have us a reunion," so we put it together. We call ourselves the Scotland High School First-Footers, because we were the first ones to set foot in the high school. Fiftieth-anniversary reunion. And I've met with several classmates who are organizing the thing. One of them said, "You know, our children won't ever appreciate us, but if the internet informational grid that covers the world all of a sudden collapsed, we're the last generation that could do anything manually." I said, "That's frightening." I mean, that is. It is frightening. I think technology needs to be icing on the cake, but it doesn't need to be the cake.

That's about all my mind held at one time. I've probably told you more than I know.

[End of recording]